TIMUR AND HIS SQUAD

A story by Arkadi Gaidar retold

ARKADI GAIDAR

One of the best loved Soviet children's writers, Arkadi Gaidar, had a remarkable life. He himself thought it was because he had been born at a remarkable time.

In 1917 the workers and peasants of the vast Russian Empire overthrew the rule of the Tsar, the landlords and the capitalists and took power into their own hands.

The former rulers of Russia and the ruling classes of capitalist countries were not, of course, pleased to see the emergence of a new socialist state, headed by a government the working people had elected themselves, a state free from exploitation, where all were equal.

Some units of the old Russian army were led by Tsarist officers against the new Soviet government and were backed by 14 capitalist powers which organized armed intervention against the young Soviet Republic.

In 1918 the Soviet government formed a people's army, the Red Army, which heroically defended the gains of the revolution.

Arkadi Gaidar was then 14. He volunteered to go to the front and became a Red Army soldier. At 15 he was commanding a company and at 16 a regiment.

He fought until the enemy forces had been completely defeated and all the interventionists driven from his country. He would have liked to continue army service but in 1923 he fell seriously ill as a result of concussion and had to leave the army.

"It was then that I began to write," Gaidar recalled. "Perhaps this was because I was still very young when I was in the army and I wanted to tell boys and girls about the life of those times, about how it all began and what happened later: I had seen quite a lot."

During his short life—he died at the age of 37—Gaidar became a great friend of children and wrote many good books for them.

Timur and His Squad was published in the early 1940s. It was a period when the world's first socialist country was building a new life, a new powerful industry free from private owners and a new collective-farm system without landlords, thus creating a basis for new relationships between people. The Soviet government gave everyone the right to work and leisure, and the right to education. Great things were being done. Children too wanted to take part in everything that was happening. With all the enthusiasm and responsiveness of youth, they were looking for ways to help adults in their endeavours.

The main character in *Timur and His Squad* is a member of the Pioneer children's organization (for children 10 to 15 years of age) who exemplifies many of the fine traits of Soviet children in those days. It is a story about how a child's game became an important undertaking and how it influenced and changed the children drawn into it.

Fascist Germany had not yet attacked Russia when Gaidar's book appeared, but the dark clouds of war were already gathering on the horizon. *Timur and His Squad* reflected the author's desire to prepare the rising generation for the grim trials ahead.

In 1941 the Great Patriotic War began. Just like Timur, hundreds of thousands of boys and girls helped the families of those fighting on the battlefields and those killed in action. They helped the front by helping in the rear.

In this way a nationwide patriotic children's movement arose, which came to be known as the Timur movement.

When the war began Arkadi Gaidar went to the front and died heroically in unequal battle against the nazis in the early days of the war.

. . .

This book introduces you to the main characters of *Timur and His Squad*: a daring girl Zhenya, her student sister Olga, their father, Red Army Colonel Alexandrov, the kind-hearted and courageous Timur and his friends and enemies.

Colonel Alexandrov was away serving in the army, and his daughters were moving to their country house near Moscow for the summer without him. His elder daughter, Olga, left on a lorry with their luggage while her younger sister Zhenya stayed behind to tidy up the flat, after which she was going to send her father a telegram and then leave town by train.

Zhenya did not have time to send the wire to her father from the station in Moscow, so when she got off the train she went to look for the local post office. She walked through an old park and, finding herself in a deserted street, realized that she had lost her way.

She opened a gate at random and walked up the path to the porch of a cottage.

"Can you please tell me the way to the post office?" Zhenya called out in a loud but very polite voice. There was no reply.

She opened the door and went in. There was not a soul anywhere... She turned to leave but was brought up short by a large dog which crawled from under the table and lay down, barring her way.

"Don't be silly!" Zhenya said, "I'm not a burglar! Go after thieves and spies but leave good folk alone! Look, here's the key to our flat, and this is the telegram for Dad. He's a Red Army officer, understand?"

The dog did not budge. Zhenya tried slipping out through the window, but the dog sprang to its feet with a loud snarl. There was nothing she could do but wait for the owners of the house to come.

Zhenya leaned her head against the hard arm-rest of the sofa, cried a little and then fell softly asleep.

When she woke up it was already morning. Her head was now resting on a pillow and there was a blanket over her feet. The dog had gone. Somebody had been here during the night! There was a note on the table.

It said: "When you leave shut the door well, Timur." Timur! Who was Timur? She must find him and thank him. She looked in the next room. There was no one there. She heard the dog's terrifying growl and dashed out of the house into the street, forgetting her key and telegram on the table.

Finally Zhenya found her house and slowly mounted the porch steps.

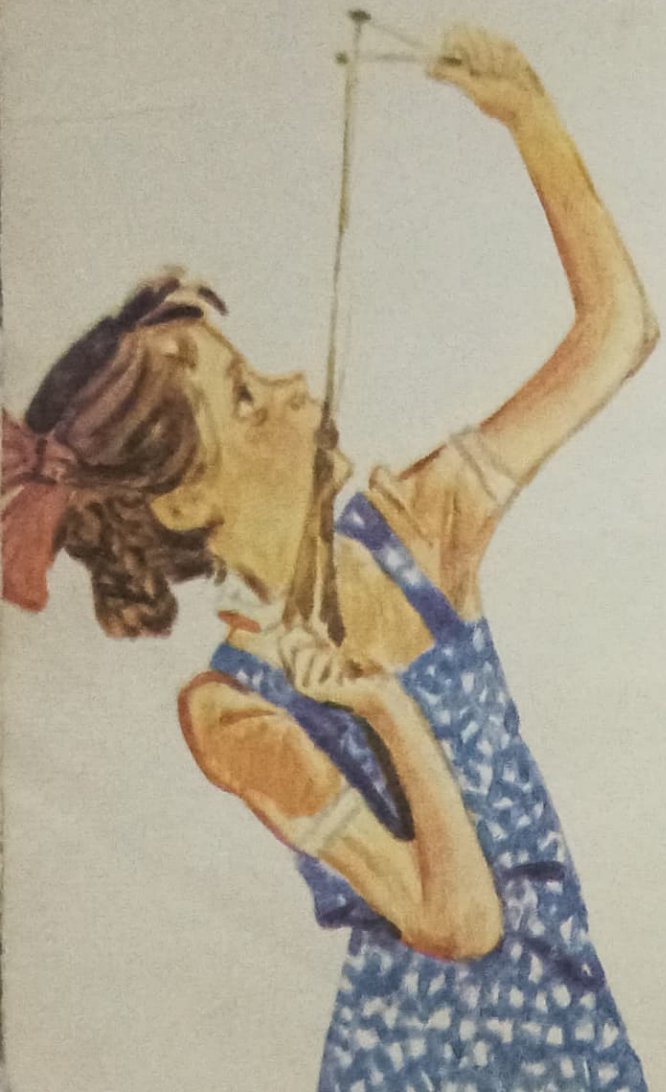
"Hello, Olga!" she said with a brave smile. "You've no idea what a strange adventure I've had! I've lost the key to the flat and I haven't sent off the wire to Dad."

Just then the gate flew open and a goat came charging in, followed by a girl shouting.

Seizing this opportunity to postpone the unpleasant conversation, Zhenya rushed into the garden to chase the goat out.

"Here, take the key and this receipt. Your telegram has already been sent," the girl said so no one else could hear, and thrust into Zhenya's hand a slip of paper which said: "No need to worry. Everything's all right, and I won't tell anyone. Timur."

Zhenya tucked the note away in her pocket and went back to her bewildered sister: "I was only joking, Olga. I tidied the flat and scrubbed the floor. Here's the key and here's the receipt for the telegram. And let me give you a kiss."



Hidden away among the trees at the back of the Alexandrovs' cottage there was an old shed. Standing not far from it Zhenya took a catapult from her pocket and shot a tiny cardboard parachutist up into the air.

Almost immediately a gust of wind carried the parachutist into the loft window of the shed. From the roof of the shed there were strings stretched taut in all directions.

"Oh dear, I must go and rescue the little man!"

Zhenya set a rickety ladder against the shed, climbed up to the window and jumped down onto the floor of the loft.

"This is very odd! It looks as though someone's living here! Why, there's a telephone... And a ship's steering wheel..."

It reminded her of a big ship. Well, that was fine! She'd be the captain. "Hard aport!" she cried in a loud voice and swung the wheel. Suddenly the telephone rang. So it was not a toy telephone after all... She felt uneasy. She picked up the receiver and heard a sharp voice. "Hullo! Hullo! Who's there? What silly ass is breaking the wires and sending out meaningless signals?"

"It's no ass," said Zhenya, "it's me."

"You crazy girl! Leave the wheel alone and run for your life! They're coming any moment and you'll catch it!"

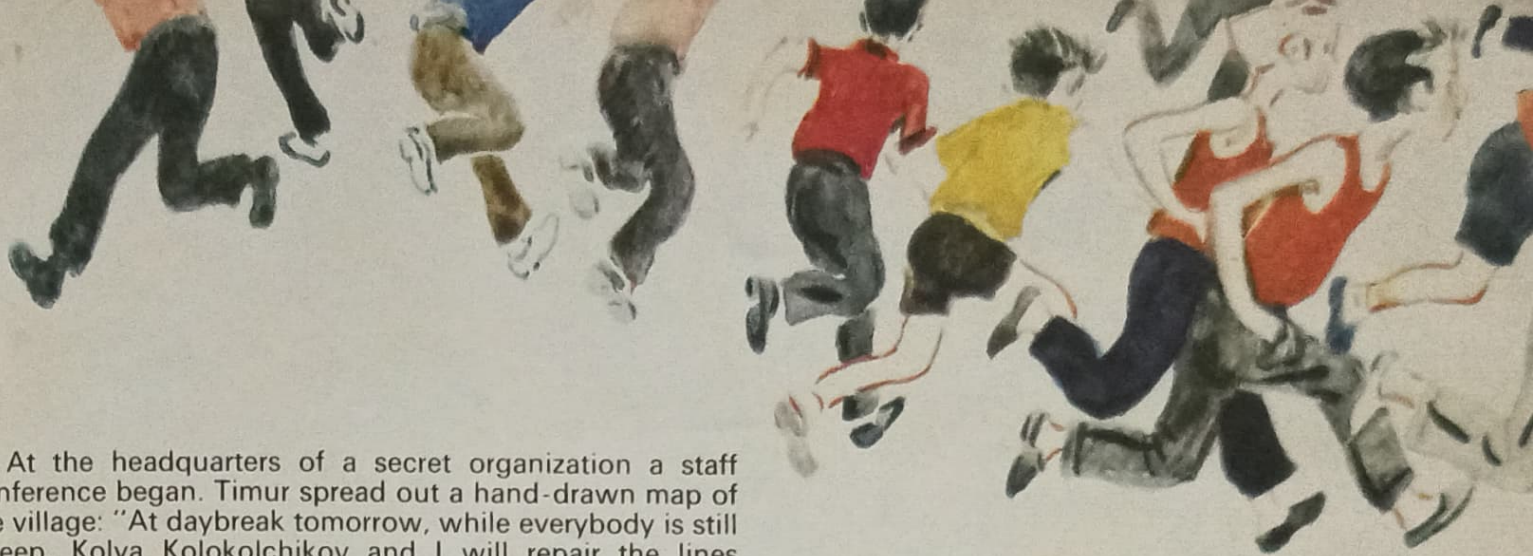
But it was too late. The loft was rapidly filling with boys.

"Who are you?" said Zhenya. "Go away! This is our garden. I didn't ask you to come."

At that moment yet another shadow darkened the window. The boys made way and Zhenya found herself facing a new boy. "Calm down, Zhenya! No one's going to hurt you. We know each other. I'm Timur."

"Timur?! So it was you covered me with a blanket last night? You left the note on the table and sent off the wire to Dad? But why?"

"Sit down and listen to me, I'll explain everything."



At the headquarters of a secret organization a staff conference began. Timur spread out a hand-drawn map of the village: "At daybreak tomorrow, while everybody is still asleep, Kolya Kolokolchikov and I will repair the lines Zhenya broke."

"Unidentified boys have shaken apples from a tree and broken some of its branches in the orchard at No. 34. That's where Kryukov lives, who's serving in the Red Army," reported Kolya.

"That's the work of Kvakin and his deputy, Figgy," one of the boys said. "Right! We'll deal with Kvakin separately. What next?"

"The son of the old dairymaid at No. 25 has been called up into the cavalry."

"That's old news!" Timur said reproachfully. "We've had our mark on her gate for two days already."

Sima Simakov jumped up: "A goat's been lost in Pushkarskaya Street. At No. 54, where Guryev lives. He's in the army now and the old woman's taking it out on the girl there, Nyurka."

"Find the goat!" Timur ordered. "Take a squad of four."

The conference was over. Not making a sound the boys vanished in all directions. Timur and Zhenya stepped out into the street.

"Is everything clear now?" "Not quite..."

They stopped at a gate which had a little red star on it.

"Look, the man here has joined the army and his house is now under our protection. But no one must know this," said Timur.

"And here," they came to another gate, "is Lieutenant Pavlov's house. He was killed recently at the frontier. His small daughter is living here. Do her a good turn, Zhenya, if you have a chance."

That evening when Olga was buying milk from a dairymaid next door she noticed two boys in the street discussing something. She recognized one of them: it was the ruffian Kvakin. "Who's Kvakin talking to?" she asked the woman. "I don't know. I suppose it's one of them hoodlums. He hangs around your place all the time." This worried Olga.

But the two boys were not talking in anything like a friendly way.

"Look here: you saw the star at No. 34?" Timur was saying.

"So what?" "Then take my advice, big chief, and whenever you see this sign anywhere, day or night, run for your life! And pass this on to all your gang."

Strange things were happening in the village. A load of logs, delivered to the old woman whose granddaughter had lost the goat, had been dumped down anyhow. The old woman groaned and wheezed as she began to stack the logs. It was too much for her. She gave up and hobbled off to her vegetable plot.

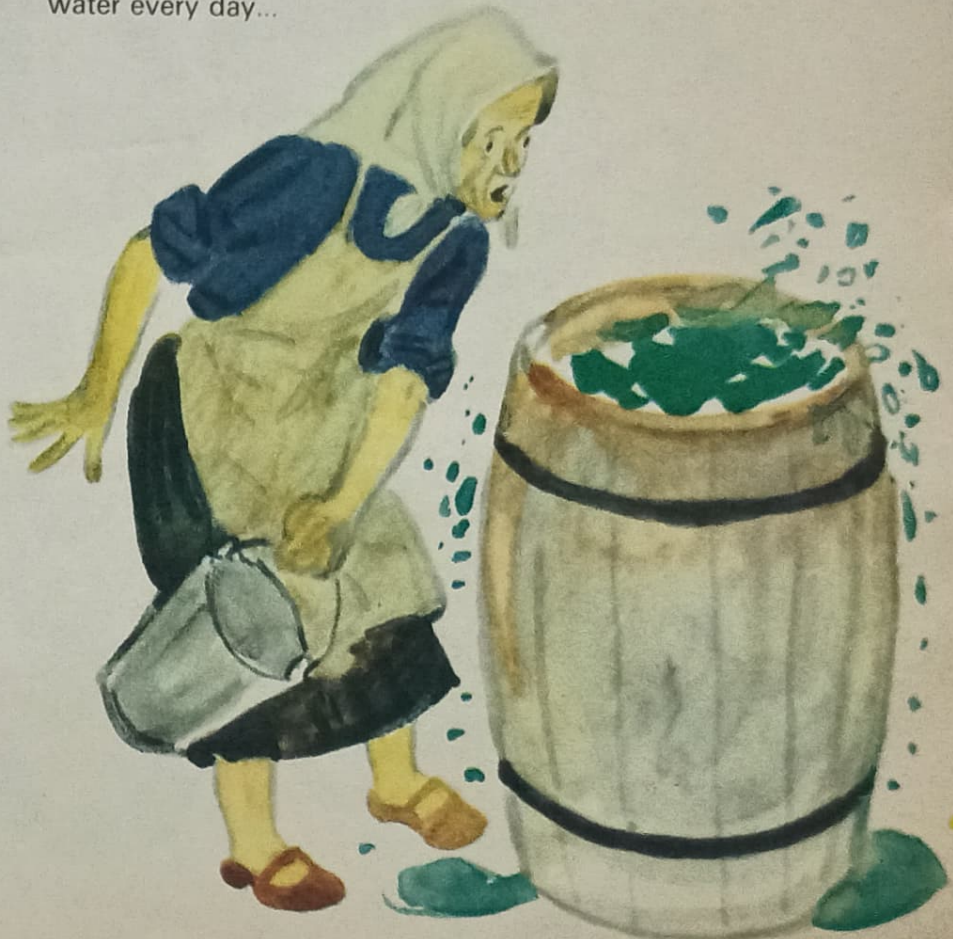
A moment later a bunch of boys rushed into the yard and quickly stacked the logs, trying to make as little noise as possible.

The old woman came back and could not believe her eyes: there was a neat pile of firewood...

The goat came running back home all by itself and there was a notice fastened to its horns which said:

"I've got sharp horns. Look out,
If Nyurka gets a clout!"

And the water tank in the house-yard of the old dairymaid whose son had been called up into the army filled itself with water every day...



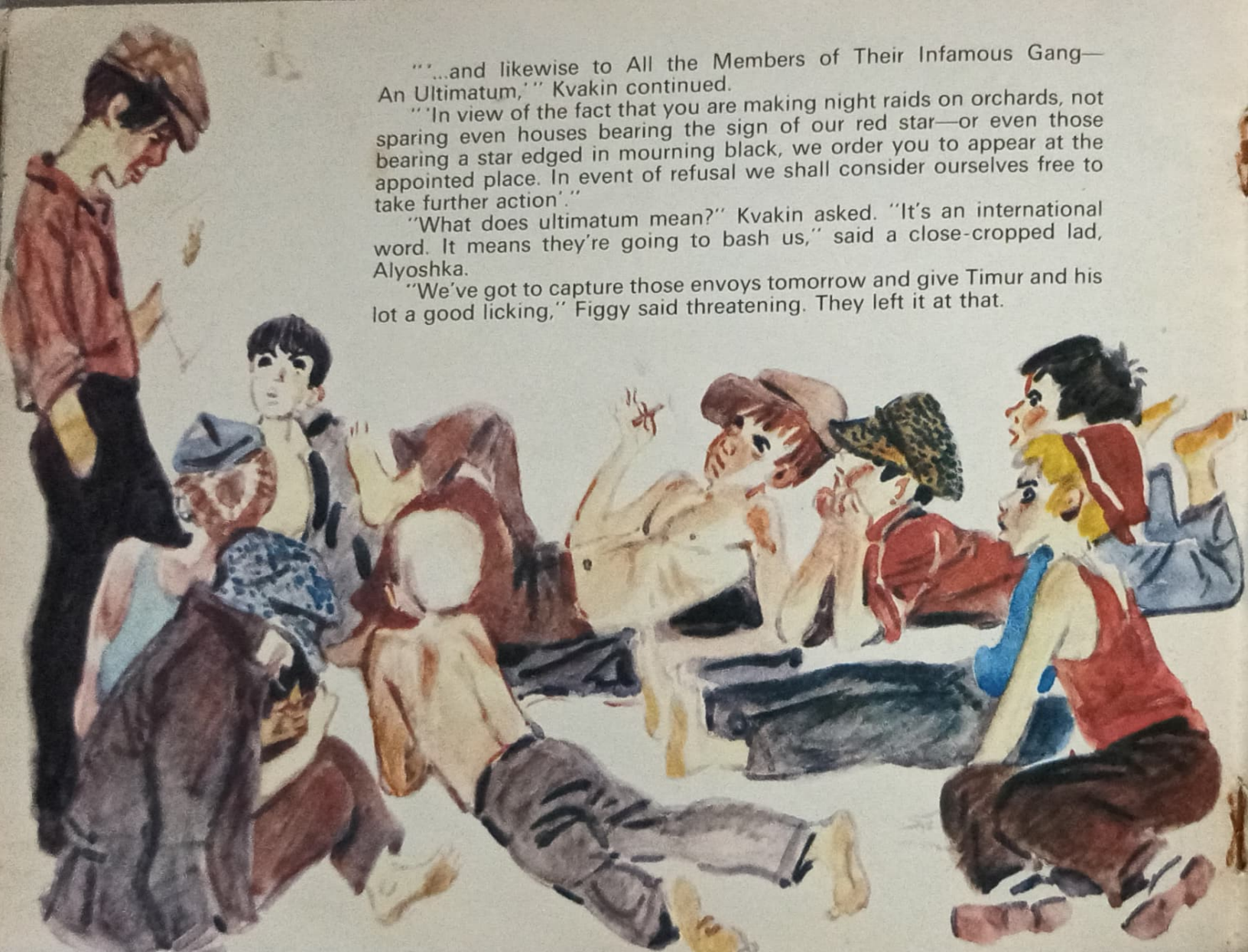
But the night raids on the apple orchards continued. Timur and his friends decided to send Kvakin an ultimatum.

Kolya Kolokolchikov and Geika set off for the old hut where the Kvakin gang had their base.

"Take this!" Geika handed Kvakin the ultimatum in an envelope.

"You have twenty-four hours to think it over. I shall come for your answer tomorrow at the same time."

Puzzled, Kvakin tore open the envelope and read aloud: "'To Mikhail Kvakin, Big Chief of the Gang for Mopping-up Other People's Orchards,' That's me," he explained. "'And to his Deputy, known as Figgy...' That's you," he nodded in Figgy's direction.



"'...and likewise to All the Members of Their Infamous Gang—An Ultimatum,'" Kvakin continued.

"'In view of the fact that you are making night raids on orchards, not sparing even houses bearing the sign of our red star—or even those bearing a star edged in mourning black, we order you to appear at the appointed place. In event of refusal we shall consider ourselves free to take further action'."

"What does ultimatum mean?" Kvakin asked. "It's an international word. It means they're going to bash us," said a close-cropped lad, Alyoshka.

"We've got to capture those envoys tomorrow and give Timur and his lot a good licking," Figgy said threatening. They left it at that.

At eleven next morning Geika and Kolya reappeared at the old hut.

"Give us the answer to our letter," Geika demanded firmly. "Here you are," said Kvakin, handing him a piece of paper folded up. Geika unfolded it and saw a crude thumb-to-nose drawing.

Geika calmly tore the sheet in two; not a muscle of his face moved. At that moment the two boys were seized by the arms.

"You deserve a good thrashing for that ultimatum of yours, but we're good guys. We'll just lock you up in here till nightfall and tonight we'll strip the orchard at No. 24."

"You'll do no such thing," Geika calmly replied. "Oh yes, we will!" cried Figgy, slapping Geika in the face.

The captives were pushed into a little building like a cell and the door was locked and barred from the outside.

"Well," shouted Figgy, "how are things going now, your way or ours?" From inside came a hollow voice: "From now on things will never go your way any more!"

"You hit him when he couldn't hit back," Alyoshka said to Figgy. "Is that fair?"

"Then I'll sock you one, too!" Figgy snarled and hit him.

No one saw Sima Simakov's face appear briefly in the thick foliage of a lime tree. Sima slipped to the ground and ran off to where his friends were waiting.

Timur's squad crept up to the building noiselessly, set Geika and Kolya free and put Figgy inside to take their place.

Timur locked the door and hung on it a scrawled note:

"Kvakin, there's no need to guard them. I've locked them up and taken the key. I'll come straight to the orchard at dusk."

Figgy pounded frantically on the locked door. Soon Kvakin appeared, read the note and grinned. "Pound away, Geika! You'll get fed up of that before evening!"

A file of boys crept along the fence of No. 24. "Everybody's here but Figgy," Kvakin said in a low voice. "He's a sly one," someone remarked. "I'll bet he's in the orchard already. He's always barging in first."

Leaving Alyoshka in the street to keep watch, the Kvakin gang climbed over the fence.

A few minutes later the sentry felt strong hands gripping his arms and legs. He managed to give a piercing whistle but immediately a hand was clapped over his mouth.

"Kvakin! There are torch lights! They're coming!" "Fight back, don't run!" shouted Kvakin, throwing apples at the torches. "Knock the torches out of their hands! It's Timur. Oho, a whole army! Over the fence, quick!" But Geika and some other boys were waiting for them in the street.

"Don't bash the prisoners! Geika, lead them away," Timur's voice came from the darkness.

The prisoners were led to an empty booth at the side of the market square, pushed in one after another and locked up.

"Bring Kvakin over here to me," Timur ordered.

"Run along," Timur told Kvakin. "You're just a joke. Nobody's afraid of you and nobody needs you. Take this key and go let your friend Figgy out."

"Let the lads out or let me go in with them," he growled.

"No," said Timur, "You're finished with them and they're finished with you."

The boys left. There was an infernal banging and yelling from the booth. Lights went on in the windows of neighbouring houses. A crowd gathered. Someone switched on the light over the booth and people saw the following notice: "Passersby, dont' pity them! Those inside here sneak into our orchards at night and steal apples. The key to the padlock is behind this notice. Anyone releasing the prisoners is advised to make sure first of all that he has no relatives or friends among them."

Next day the whole community was buzzing with talk about the capture of the hooligans. Olga met Timur walking with Zhenya in the park and went straight up to him.

"Look here, you sneak into orchards and break branches. Even the dogs run away from you. You may wear a Young Pioneer's tie, but you're really a scoundrel!"

Timur turned pale. "That's not true," he said. "You don't know anything." But Olga did not even listen to him. She categorically forbade Zhenya even to approach Timur.

To punish Zhenya, Olga left for Moscow that evening without saying another word to her.

Soon after Olga's departure, Lieutenant Pavlov's widow came to the door of the Alexandrovs' cottage, holding her little daughter in her arms. Zhenya knew her, because she went to see the girl and played with her quite often now. The woman had to go to Moscow urgently so she asked Zhenya to take care of her daughter for the night.

Zhenya put the girl to bed and ran off to play volleyball.

She returned late and it was some time before she noticed two telegrams on the windowsill. One was from Olga and the other from her father. Both said the Colonel would be in Moscow from midnight to 3 a. m.

Zhenya looked at the clock in horror: it was a quarter to twelve. She had to rush to Moscow at all costs. But how could she leave the little girl alone in the house?

The minutes ticked slowly away. She heard the whistle of the last train to Moscow.

No! The anguish was unbearable! She must run! To the telephone in the shed!

Up in the loft Zhenya switched on her torch, stepped to the ship's helm, found the string she wanted and hitching it over a hook, turned the wheel sharply...

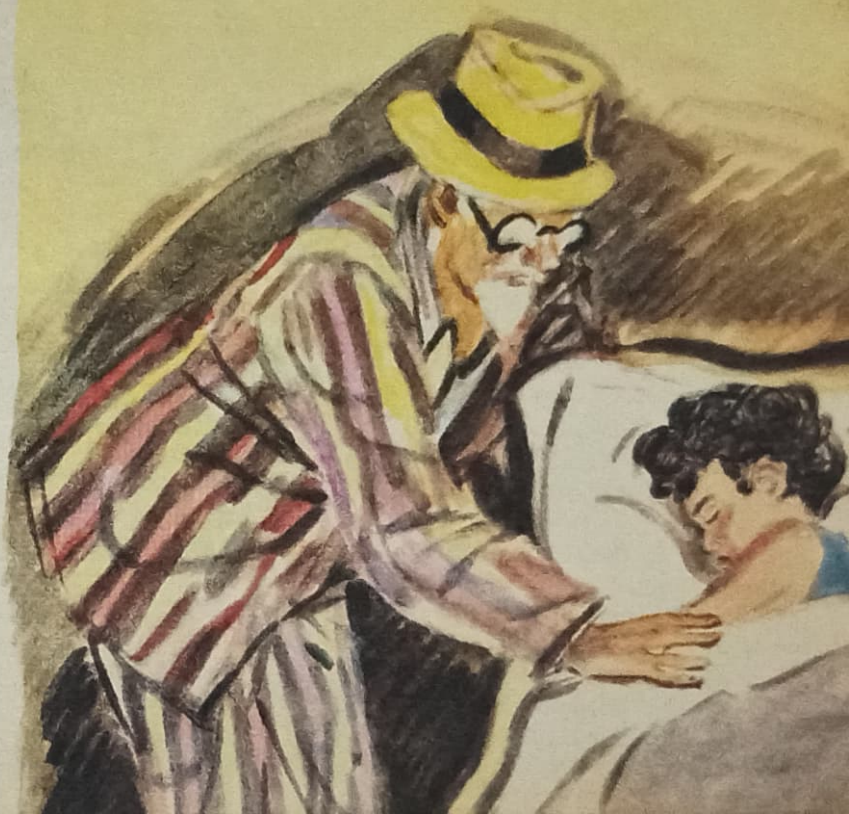
Timur was asleep when his dog touched him with its paw and then pulled the blanket off with its teeth. "What's the matter, Rita?" he asked half-awake and then at once heard the bell ringing. "Yes, it's me, Timur. Zhenya? Don't cry! I'm coming right away!"

What could he do to help? A Red Army officer's daughter was in trouble! There was the red star sign on the gate of Zhenya's house. Timur had put it there himself!

Timur dressed quickly and a few minutes later was at the door of old Dr. Kolokolchikov's cottage. The doctor was surprised to see Timur at this hour. "Who do you want to see?" he asked. "It's you, I want to talk to you," said Timur.

They did not talk for long. "That's what we've been doing and that's how we've been playing, and that's why I need your Kolya now," Timur finished explaining.

The old man rose without a word, went to the room where Kolya was sleeping and tugged at the boy's shoulder. "Get up, get up! Your friend is waiting for you!"



Timur sent Kolya along to Zhenya's place and ran home. There he found an axe, went out into the garden and stopped by the locked garage. There was no one whose permission he could ask for what he intended to do: his uncle with whom he was now staying had gone to Moscow for the night. Timur knew it wasn't right for him to open the garage, but he had no choice. He knocked the lock off with the axe and wheeled out the motorbike.

Moments later he was at Zhenya's cottage. "Kolya, you stay here and look after the little girl. Zhenya, hop on the back, we're off to Moscow."

Colonel Alexandrov's short leave was drawing to an end. He looked at his watch sadly. Zhenya hadn't come...

The front door banged, Zhenya swept into the room and rushed up to her father.

"Well done, Zhenya! Good girl!" the Colonel exclaimed, overwhelmed.

Olga showered her with questions: "Where were you? You're all covered in mud, your face is black! How did you get here?"

Not saying a word, Zhenya went to the open door where Timur had now appeared. "Papa, don't you believe anybody! They don't know anything. This is Timur, my very good friend!" Her father rose and shook Timur's hand. Olga was utterly mystified, but she too took a step to Timur.

Timur was smiling and his eyes seemed to be saying: "They're all well! They're happy! So I'm happy too!"

It is more than 40 years since the war ended and peace came to Soviet soil. The Soviet Union is a country that wants peace for all mankind. It wants to see people of all races free, equal, healthy and happy. It wants all children to study and all grownups to have jobs.

Along with their mothers and fathers Soviet children are doing everything they can to achieve these aims.

The Timur movement is spreading. Its members help war veterans and old people. They organize playgrounds for children in courtyards and give concerts. They are among the first to join children's teams helping farmers in the fields or collecting herbs, and donate all the money they earn to the Peace Fund.

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